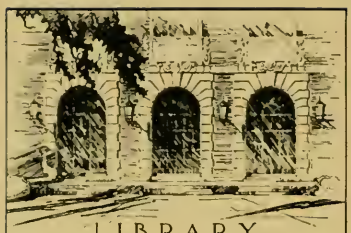

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John G. Talbot
Dec. 1860.

The Word of the Lord to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF CANTERBURY,

ON THE SENDING FORTH OF ARCHDEACON MACKENZIE AND HIS COMPANY TO AFRICA,

OCTOBER 2, 1860.

BY

SAMUEL, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD,

LORD HIGH ALMONER TO HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN, AND CHANCELLOR OF THE ORDER OF THE GARTER.

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A SERMON.

JEREMIAH xxxix. 15—17.

"Now the word of the Lord came unto Jeremiah, while he was shut up in the court of the prison, saying,

"Go and speak to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring my words upon this city for evil, and not for good; and they shall be accomplished in that day before thee.

"But I will deliver THEE in that day, saith the Lord: and thou shalt not be given into the hand of the men of whom thou art afraid."

THERE is scarcely any passage in Holy Scripture in which there is revealed to us more clearly than here some features of the character of the Lord our God. That moreover which is revealed is not only of the deepest moment for the support of our own spiritual life, but it has also a very special bearing on the objects of our gathering here to-day; and to it, therefore, I desire to draw your thoughts this morning. And may HE, the Eternal Spirit of Truth, so enlighten my mind and so guide and restrain my lips, and so prepare your hearts, that upon this great theme I may speak what and as I ought to speak, and you receive it as it should be received.

Set then, brethren, before your eyes the events

which, when this word of the Lord came to the prophet Jeremiah, were passing at Jerusalem.

There only upon earth remained the covenant of THE ETERNAL with His creatures; there only, amidst the storm of human passion and the darkness of universal error, burnt on—and now how feebly!—the beacon fire of His Truth. For more than one hundred years the light of Israel had been wholly quenched. In spite of the moving words, and mighty signs, and glorious lives of Elijah and his brethren, the ten tribes had continued their provocations until wrath from God had come upon them to the uttermost — yea, until "the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of His sight*," visiting them with that terrible dispersion which scattered them so utterly amongst the nations, that to this day their place has nowhere been found.

And now "there was none left but the tribe of Judah only†." All the promises of God—all covenanted mercy for mankind—hung upon that feeble remnant;—from the House of David must spring the long-promised Messiah, the bruiser of the serpent's head, the redeemer of man, the restorer of humanity; and the tribe of Judah, as it seemed, was following the ten, and the monarchy of the House of David was wasting away with as utter a destruction as that which had already consumed

* 2 Kings xvii. 18. † 2 Kings xvii. 18.

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the dynasty of Samaria. Verily, around Judah and Jerusalem the foundations of the earth were breaking up. God had forsaken them. The mighty hosts of the haughty Babylonish conqueror had now sat—like vultures round the dying carcase—for months around the doomed city. Within it was violence, bloodshed, terror, and obstinate hard heartedness. Heaven and earth seemed to watch with despairing grief the throes and agony of the coming dissolution. Yet a few more days, and the city of David shall be broken up, and the heir of David's throne shall see, as his last sight, the murder of his sons before his eyes, and then those eyes shall be put out, and he shall be sent in fetters of brass, with all his people, to the far land of their captivity. One mark only of God's presence abides with the forsaken election. In Jeremiah's tones of anguish there lingers still amongst them the voice of prophecy; and in these very last hours, amidst this confusion of earth and heaven; amidst these groans of the expiring kingdom; the Word of the Lord comes to him, and he is sent with the prophetic utterance of special mercy to one man amongst those trembling, agonized crowds. Picture to yourselves, if you can, the vastness—the wonder—of the mercy! This was no general prophecy of good, which was to be stored in the written Word for the comfort of a thousand generations of the contrite. Condescension for such vast interests as those might seem to suit the character

of the All Merciful Father. But that, from His eternal throne, he should stoop to watch the beatings of one labouring heart—to single out from all that crowd of sufferers one stricken soul—to send from Heaven to him alone, by name, the marvellous assurance that he was had in remembrance, that he should be kept in safety, that he should not be delivered into the hands of the men of whom he was afraid—this tenderness even to his fears, this remembrance of his need—surely this must to him, in that awful hour, when all things were breaking up round about him, have been well nigh overwhelming!

And to whom was this Word of the Lord sent? To some faithful one in the Royal House; to some one through whom the seed of David might yet be preserved, until from it Shiloh should come? No: but to "Ebed-melech the Ethiopian"—to one of the negro eunuchs in the king's house, "because thou hast put thy trust in Me, saith the Lord."

O brethren! contemplate anew with me the wonders of the Almighty and the Everlasting. See how surpassing thought is the greatness of His love; is His condescension; His remembrance of His own; His tenderness towards them; in this His recollection of this despised example of a despised race—how He cares for the souls that He hath made—how (dark as are the mists of time, blinding, as it seems to us, the gross vapours of this lower world) His eye is ever on them; His

heart ever open to them—and how, in His own good time for every one that trusteth in Him, "He lifteth the poor out of the mire, that He may set him with the princes of His people."

Here then, *first*, let us see the marvels of God's love, that we may understand for ourselves something of the mystery of the everlasting counsels of our redemption; that we may know something of the love which passeth knowledge; that we may see how the love of Christ, and the healing of the Cross, and the sympathy of the Everlasting Redeemer, do indeed reach down to each separate, single, individual soul, in its day of trial, yea to us, ourselves, in our weakness, and fear, and guilt, and anguish; that we may comprehend redemption to be no vast scenic representation of a general, all-embracing benevolence, but the action of the personal love of the omnipotent and omniscient Creator and Redeemer towards each separate soul in the singleness of its own wonderful and incommunicable being; that His eye is over each one; that in all the tumult and confusion of the wildest earthly storm—amidst the crowd and intricacy of all the multitude of lives which throng this populous earth, the remembrance and tender compassion of the Lord is full and entire for each one of the innumerable mass, as if he stood alone in a desert world; and that to Him, as knowing all, and feeling for all, each stricken heart may indeed turn for sympathy and deliverance. This I say first,

that to us also, in the day of our distress, may come that Word of the Lord, "Thy life shall be for a prey unto thee: because thou hast put thy trust in Me, saith the Lord."

And then, *secondly*, let us understand this:—that as the Church of Christ is to be His Witness upon earth, she—if she is faithful—must reproduce in her actions amongst men this character of her Lord. There must be marked upon her, in every age, this tenderness for souls; and especially for the weak, the tempted, and the fallen. The world passes by such, because true inward love, breaking forth in the healing streams of tenderness and sympathy, is not and can not be in her. These blessed graces must be learned under the Cross of Calvary—must be implanted, and nurtured, and perfected, by the Blessed Spirit, which proceedeth from the Father, and from the Son, and who dwells with and animates the Church of the redeemed. So it has been always. The woman that has been a sinner weeps ever at the Lord's feet, and amidst the gibes and reproaches of the Pharisees of every generation is evermore received and comforted by Him. And from Him flows evermore to His Church this Divine love.

This is the power which has swept away, as an evil vision, the amphitheatre in which the gladiator's agony made sport for his tormentors, and placed in its stead, in every city, sheltering refuges for the down-trodden and the wretched; which

has strewn Christendom with hospitals, and penetentiaries, with lazar houses and infirmaries; which has broken the fetters of slaves, and which has ministered to prisoners and captives; which has sent the nobly born to serve beside the bed of fevered restlessness, and bowed the purple pride of kings to wash the feet of outcasts. Whereever, in any age or country, this spirit thoroughly dies out, all true service of the Lord dies out with it. There the proud, harsh, cold, selfish world is reasserting its accursed dominion. To this, the narrow, precise, unsympathizing dryness of Pharisaical respectability, and the cold, shadowy, questioning, unbelieving temper of the Sadducee—both ever present amongst men, and ever hating and jeering at the Cross of Christ—is always working to bring down the tone of the Church of the redeemed. There is always some good reason to be urged against ventures for Christ. They are at variance with every counsel of ease and of self-indulgence; they are always so ill-timed; so disturbing to family comfort; they rub off so rudely the brightness of tinsel decency; the spirit which leads to them seems to the worldly wise to be so unpractical, so fanatical, so exaggerated. Yes, it must be so. To such a temper, what an exaggeration is the Cross! what an unintelligible mystery it is that the Eternal Son of God should hang upon it; what a monstrous thought, that in the midst of its agonies that heart of love could beat with a dis-

criminating tenderness for the agony of one dying malefactor.

Against this spirit then within herself the Church must ever be watching, praying, and struggling. Evermore she must renew beneath the Cross her estimate of the blessedness of ministering to the lost because they are the lost, and lifting up the weak because they have no strength. A happy thing it is, brethren, for any age or branch of the Church to be stirred up by the breath of God even to one signal act of such a temper. For such an act is a protest and a struggle against the spirit of the world, which, reaching far beyond the martyr band who win the highest crowns, may awaken a multitude of slumbering souls, and even stir up, if God will, the dying embers of a nation's love. Such in its measure is every true missionary effort by which, as from Antioch of old, the Church casts herself forth from her own peaceful abundance to convert the miserable heathen. Every such attempt—however accidentally fashionable it may for a time become—is, depend upon it, esteemed by the world in its inmost heart to be a waste, an extravagance, and an absurdity. Every such effort does as surely bless and revive the body out of which it springs. It is indeed the work of God the Holy Ghost, and it ministers to the body out of which He calls it forth, union, reality, new spiritual life, clearer visions of the Cross, closer access to it, more of its transforming, elevating, saving power.

Pre-eminently such a movement is that which has gathered us together to-day in this noblest and chiefest of England's Cathedral Churches. Springing from the bosom of our two famous Universities, it is an active protest, and, under God's blessing, may be a safeguard against the special dangers to which such bodies must be exposed;—against the lethargy of an unspiritual respectability, and the yet deeper lethargy of a questioning unbelief. Springing up within our Church, it may be a special means of healing our intestine divisions—of abating our party spirit—and of fanning to a flame the dying fires of our love to our Lord and to one another.

Such a movement I say it is; for note its special characters: it is the highest and best trained intellect of our Universities flinging aside ease, position, wealth, and the delights of scientific speculation, and going forth for the love of Christ to bless the most ignorant and barbarous;—it is our Church in its completeness, as we trust, of her apostolical organization, casting herself forth amongst the outcasts of the people. This then is just one of those ventures of faith which not only wins the crown of an apostle for its actual leader, but blesses also all the body out of which it springs. For it is a mighty act of love; and "love is of God; and he that loveth is born of God and knoweth God."

Yea, brethren, and how special a resemblance

has it to that act of God's remembrance to which I called at first your thoughts,—"The word of the Lord came unto Jeremiah the prophet, saying, go and speak to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian." What other Word has come to our brother whom we now send forth? Go, the voice has said unto him, go and speak to the despised enslaved tribes of suffering Ethiopia. Witness unto them that they are not forgotten of their God;—that the love of the Eternal Father is not partial and unequal—willing to save some of the fallen race, whilst it reaches not to others—but that it yearns over all;—that even now it is yearning over, and thus has stirred up in the heart of Christendom this longing to work out their redemption. Go, the voice has said, go and witness to them that they may cast aside their fetich rites and devil worship; for that the blood of Christ was shed for them, and that HE will deliver them from the hand of him of whom they have been so long afraid. Go and tell them that over them too the regenerating, converting, transforming Spirit yearns with all the unfathomable tenderness of the love of God.

Here then is our purpose and our work; take, I pray you, brethren, a real hearty share in it,—many of you have done so already;—in giving up to it your friends; in offering for it of your substance; in pleading for it in your prayers, you have already done much, yet renew this day, I would beseech you, your interest in it and your

labours for it. See that these efforts are not only for the outcasts of Africa, but also for your Father's land and for your Father's Church. Yea, brethren, such a movement as this is both a sign and an instrument of good. It shows, amidst the evils with which we are so sadly conversant,—amidst our suspicions, and our divisions, and our speculations on God's Word,—how strong is the Spirit's life within our branch of Christ's Holy Church. For whence otherwise could issue these castings of the light into the darkness. It is when the iron is heated to a glowing furnace heat, and is poured out like water, that the fiery mass shoots spontaneously forth its candescent sparks into the surrounding darkness. If there were not amongst us souls burning, yea, molten with the love of Christ, never would there have been shot into the heathen darkness of Africa this light from our light. And as such works are a sign, so are they also the strengtheners and revivers of life. The branch which breaks forth from the stem not only shows but nourishes the inner life of the trunk from which it springs. Through every leaf and leaflet it absorbs the life-giving air which breathes around it, and with its descending sap returning as it has received, it feeds the fibre, and swells the bark, and deepens the roots of the parent tree. And so the "lign aloes which the Lord hath planted," as they spread their fragrant boughs around, take a firmer hold of that enduring faithfulness from which is all their strength. This,

be assured, is the universal rule: look where you will amongst the descending ages, and never will you find the Church anywhere bursting forth into these mighty ministries of love, and not find her also receiving back into herself in larger volume the blessing of her Lord. "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth." "The soul of the bountiful shall be made fat."

And surely God has signally fitted us as a Church to do this work, and to receive this blessing.

Who, standing in this glorious building, as his eyes drink in its shadows and its lights, but must cast back the glance of his memory along all the marvellous steps by which, even unto this day, our course has been guided by our God. Go back in thought to the time when the first evangelizer of Britain crossed, with the message of Christ's power and the gifts of the Holy Ghost, the neighbouring straits which parted us from the advancing Christendom. Compare the wild forests and marshes of that day, compare their wilder inhabitants with the sights and purposes of this day, and, surely, looking round us at home and across the westward waves to our daughter Church, we may say with more than the Patriarch's gratitude, "With my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands*." What a course it

* Gen. xxxii. 10.

has been by which we have been brought into this day's safety and abundance! How long and how hard was our servitude to our Laban: how many and how great our fears of our Esau. Through what struggles and dangers has it been, that we, well nigh alone, have been enabled to keep the good deposit at once in doctrine, discipline, and succession; to say our English Prayers; to read our English Bible; to consecrate an unmutilated Eucharist; to maintain an undeveloped, unclouded, apostolic creed; to set forth simply and alone, for man's salvation, the Cross of Christ, and yet to cling dutifully to His body—the Church; to cherish the glorious memory of all His Saints departed; and to inherit, by an undisputable succession from those on whom our Master breathed His power, the transmitted authority of His undying apostleship.

Surely the possession of these gifts bids us, in His own voice, to go forth from this great sanctuary of our reformed Church, and in His might evangelize the nations. Much have we to do ere this our mission be accomplished. Many such an enterprise as this must have been planned and carried out. Our neighbouring St. Augustin's College, from a little one must have become a thousand, sheltering in its halls, training in its discipline, and leavening with its creeds and prayers men of every colour, name, and blood, who, as the Master hires them, shall go forth into His field

reapers in of the greatness of the harvest. Yea, and our Church, as a Church, must have undertaken the blessed work. Oh, day of gladsome brightness for our nation! of which this gathering is as the beautiful, yet faint streak, which is at once the harbinger of the dawn, and the witness that it is not yet come.

Therefore it is, beloved brethren in Christ, that I beseech you thus earnestly to give yourselves this day with a new energy to this our work. For it is much which may be done within this Cathedral to-day. What have not the Church's prayers ere now accomplished? Plainly it is the Will of Him whose Will is absolutely Sovereign, that He should be entreated by His people: and when He will bestow His greatest gifts He stirs up first in His love the prayers which in His love He answers. The mighty apostleship of Barnabas and Saul was given to the prayers of the Church, as it ministered and fasted at Antioch*; and who can place stint or limit to the blessing to be won here to-day for the heathen, for our brethren going forth into the wilderness, yea, and for ourselves also; if this day, with one heart and one soul, we wrestle with our God at this our Penuel, and "will not let Him go unless He bless us." Oh, think, brethren, of the greatness of the enterprise, of the evils to be put down, of the blessings to be

* Acts xiii. 2.

borne forth, of the souls to be won, and pray mightily. Think of these going forth, of the great and terrible wilderness before them, of its "fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where is no water*;" of the beating of the sun by day, of the smiting of the moon by night; of the absence of the cheering voice of friends; of the loss of the inspiriting sight of the Church visible, of her presence and her power. Think of the rage of the great enemy and of all his vassal fiends, thus invaded in the very fastnesses of their evil dominion: think of all this, to which we send forth these beloved ones, and pray mightily. Think of your own needs, of your coldness and dryness of heart, of your small ventures for God, of your little love of your neighbours, of your narrowness of soul, of your restrained prayers, and your dull thanksgivings; and because intercession does break many a bond, and open many a heart, and return in showers of blessings on the soul which breathes it forth; for your own sakes too, pray this day mightily, that God may accept our offering and crown it with success.

And for THEE, true yoke-fellow and brother well beloved, who leadest forth this following; to THEE in this our parting hour—whilst yet the grasped hand tarries in the embrace of love—to THEE what shall we say? Surely what, before he gave over to younger hands his rod and staff, God's

* Deut. viii. 15.

great prophet said of old to his successor,—"Be strong and of a good courage: for thou must go with this people unto the land which the Lord hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and *Thou shalt cause them to inherit it.* And the Lord, He it is that doth go before thee; He will be with thee, He will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed*."

What can man's voice add to that solace? He at whose dear call thou goest forth, He shall be with thee; thou shalt know the secret of His presence, thou shalt see, as men see not here in their peaceful homes, the nail-pierced hands, and the thorn-crowned brow. Thou shalt find as His great saints have found before thee, when He has lured them into the desert wilderness, that He alone is better than all beside Himself. When thy heart is weakest, He shall make it strong; when all others leave thee, He shall be closest to thee; and the revelation of His love shall turn danger into peace, labour into rest, suffering into ease, anguish into joy, and martyrdom, if so He order it, into the prophet's fiery chariot, bearing thee by the straightest course to thy most desired home.

* Deut. xxxi. 7, 8.

THE END.